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ABSTRACT

The Amish people are Christian separatists who speak a non-standard German dialect (Pennsylvania German) and practice a set of religious beliefs that separate them from wider society. There are approximately 100,000 Amish living in over 30 states, with the largest single settlement located in Ohio. Amish children are often educated in public schools and, although very bright, face language and cultural barriers and should be recognized as "at risk ESL students. Educators can take several steps that will decrease the effects of these barriers. First, the Amish child's background and self concept must be appreciated and respected in the school. Second, when testing or evaluating Amish children, cultural and language differences should be considered. Third, schools with Amish enrollments should accumulate extensive readings and resources on the Amish and their culture. Fourth, communication with the Amish community should be fostered via parents, community leaders and Amish school officials. Finally, educators should understand the basic psychological make-up of the Amish child, which is quiet, shy, hardworking, exacting and group-minded socially, and should also be aware of the Amish culture. (JL)

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THE AMISH, A BILINGUAL-MULTICULTURAL PHENOMENON

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The Amish, A Bilingual-Multicultural Phenomenon

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The Amish people are Christian separatists that found their genesis in the Reformation period in Europe. There are about 100,000 Amish people today. The Amish culture and lifestyle is a mixture of conservative Biblical beliefs and cultural practices. The Amish lifestyle is significant because it resists assimilation into contemporary society. The Amish can be found in over thirty states in our country and the largest settlement is found in Ohio. The Amish have a mixture of educational beliefs and practices. Amish children can be found in rural public schools in Iowa, Indiana, and Ohio; however the Amish are also known for their extensive parochial school system (nearly 500 schools nationwide).

Public schooling of Amish children presents a unique bilingual-multicultural challenge. The Amish are a linguistic, cultural and religious minority. Their society interweaves social,

religious and cultural practices that are uniquely bound to their people. Since little information is available to teacher preparatory institutions or public schools with Amish pupils, dealing with the needs of these children, while respecting their beliefs, is rather hard. Because they are a relatively small and docile population, the bilingual and multicultural backgrounds of Amish pupils have yet to find a platform in public education. The future of Amish enrollment in public schools, of course, is always to be in question.

The traditional lifestyle and conservative religion of the Amish makes many public school customs, school facilities, text and subject contents and social customs often unfamiliar to the Amish child. The home language of the Amish is their mother tongue, a German dialect called "Pennsylvania German". Although it has a written grammar, it is basically a spoken language. It is the primary language of the Amish child. (Note-the liturgical language of Amish society is formal German). Amish children may have little, if any, exposure to English before entering school. Since the Amish mother tongue is a culturally bound non-standard dialect, it is very hard for public school teachers to become familiar with it or to teach with it.

Through many years of research and field work directly with Amish pupils, the author has a number of positive suggestions that can be listed:

1. The Amish child must be recognized as an at risk ESL pupil. Expert researchers and quality print materials should be located for educators interested in, or working with Amish children.

2. The Amish child in public school must be recognized as a student with language AND cultural barriers. The Amish child's background and self concept must be appreciated and represented in his or her public school.

3. When Amish children are tested or evaluated, the cultural and language differences should always be considered as factors in testing results.

4. Public schools with Amish enrollments should accumulate extensive readings and resources on the Amish and their culture. Expert scholars should be sought out for advice and consultation.

5. Communication with the Amish community should be fostered via parents, community leaders and Amish school officials. The resources such contacts could foster may be extensive.

6. Colleges and universities should be encouraged to include the Amish people in the content of courses in bilingual education and cultural foundations. This would be especially valuable at institutions near Amish populations.

The instructional program for Amish children should consider <u>cultural adjustment</u>. Make an attempt to enhance the child's self confidence by having pictures or some course content that features Amish society in the classroom. Older peers may be mentors for younger children for a few weeks. Teachers should also understand the basic psychological make up of the Amish child, which is quiet, shy, hard working and exacting, and group minded socially. There are also

cultural factors to be considered. Teachers and supervisors should become familiar with the Amish way of life and their religious beliefs. Children should be given time to share their culture with other students. Instructional considerations should involve carefully planning on how to best meet the many needs of Amish children, foster their development with positive self concepts, and allowing for respresentation of their culture in the school and classroom setting. Since few resources are available, time will need to be taken to locate or construct such materials. .

Amish children show very bright potential on standardized tests when their special backgrounds and needs are addressed. Since their schooling only goes to eighth grade (by special exemption), it is essential that public schools make the best use of their time to prepare them for life in their own and American society.

Amish children are acutely aware that they are in a mixed society in the public school classroom. Perhaps the biggest step towards allowing for their presence is to accept their unique backgrounds, and then to make every attempt to gain an understanding of their culture and language through study and reading.

Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb is a teacher, researcher and writer. He teaches in an Amish settlement in northeastern Ohio. Tom is a recognized scholar in the areas of language arts, and studies of the Amish people. Tom is serving on the joint NCTE and NREA committe on English-Language Arts in rural schools, and is a regular contributor to Country Teacher journal.